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ABSTRACT

Studies have shown that managers work at a frenetic pace, rapidly moving from one concern to another, coping with tremendous amounts of information picked up largely through face-to-face or telephonic oral communication. Managers somehow process this information in their minds and then make decisions. Despite the overwhelming quantity of "soft" information gathered, it is often not enough--leaving managers to make decisions in uncertainty and ambiguity. Metaphors have long been used by organizational theorists to explain organizations at the macro level. It is hypothesized that managers use metaphors to interpret and organize incoming information. It would be a very valuable contribution to management practice, management education and organizational theory if researchers could solve the mystery of how the minds of managers really work. A study of the metaphors managers actually use in processing information and making decisions might help explain how managers actually do their work in complex organizations and might be valuable to train aspiring or working managers in the use of these metaphors. Such training would not only help managers view problems from different perspectives but would also help them understand the undergirding structure of organizational theory. (Sixteen references are attached.) (Author/RAE)

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THE METAPHORS OF MANAGERS: TOWARD A THEORY OF HOW DECISIONS ARE MADE IN ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to suggest a new direction for research on how managers gather, process, and act on information in complex organizations. Managers work at a frenetic pace, rapidly move from one concern to another and cope with tremendous amounts of information picked up largely through face to face or telephonic oral communication. Managers somehow process this information in their minds and then make decisions. Despite the overwhelming quantity of "soft" information gathered, it is often not enough -- leaving managers to make decisions in uncertainty and ambiguity. Metaphors have long been used by organizational theorists to explain organizations at the macro level. It is hypothesized that managers use metaphors to interpret and organize incoming information. It is suggested that a study of the metaphors managers actually use in processing information and making decisions might help explain how managers actually do their work in complex organizations.

I. Introduction

Despite the fact that managers have been around for thousands of years (George, 1972), educatros have had relatively little success in training aspiring managers for the rigors they will face when they take on a management position (McCall, 1983). To be sure, management education helps aspiring managers develop valuable knowledge about organizations, but knowledge alone does not prepare them for the crushing demands, information overload, and time pressures which are a daily part of most managers lives. Much of this difficulty arises because scholars have done little to define the nature of managerial work, have done relatively little to study what managers actually do, and have done almost no study on the mental processes which managers use in their work (Mintzberg, 1973; Kotter, 1982; Hales, 1986; Luthans, Hodgetts, & Rosenkrantz, 1988).

This paper will first examine the research which has been done on what actual managers do in their authentic work settings. Secondly, this paper will look at the recent explicit examination of how metaphors shape our view of serious organizational theory literature. Finally, this paper will suggest that it is fruitful to study the possibility that working managers use metaphors as tools for processing information and then making decisions under conditions of uncertainty and ambiguity.

II. Managerial Work

Mintzberg

Out of a din of sophisticated management theory and a cacophony of popular management "how-to" advice, Henry Mintzberg asked a simple question. What do managers do?

He was certainly not the first person to ask that question (Hales, 1986), but his book entitled The Nature of Management Work (Mintzberg, 1973) and his article in the Harvard Business Review entitled "The Manager's Job: Folklore and Fact" (Mintzberg, 1975) drove the importance of the question home to management scholars and managers alike. The question challenged the usefulness of existing management theory and, at least for a short time, slightly slowed the growth of popular management gimmicks including the near evangelical enthusiasm of the managerial style advocates (e.g. Blake & Mouton, 1964; Hersey & Blanchard, 1982).

Mintzberg summarized the results of his studies and a literature review of previous studies in his four "facts" of managerial life. Firstly, he found that, "[s]tudy after study has shown that managers work at an unrelenting pace, that their activities are characterized by brevity, variety, and discontinuity, and that they are strongly oriented to action and dislike reflective activities" (Mintzberg, 1983, p. 6). Secondly, he found that, "[i]n addition to handling exceptions, managerial work involves performing a number of regular duties, including ritual and ceremony, negotiations,

and processing of soft information that links the organization with its environment" (Mintzberg, 1983, p. 7). Thirdly, he found that, "[m]anagers strongly favor the verbal media -- namely, telephone calls and meetings. The evidence comes from every single study of managerial work" (Mintzberg, 1983, p. 7). Fourthly, he found that, "[t]he manager's programs -- to schedule time, process information, make decisions, and so on -- remain locked deep inside their brains. Thus to describe these programs, we rely on words like judgement and intuition, seldom stopping to realize that they are merely labels for our ignorance" (Mintzberg, 1982, p.8).

Mintzberg did not see this as a problem of ivory tower management theorists misunderstanding a world which managers understand clearly. In fact he found that managers themselves could not explain what they do beyond using a simplistic version of Fayol's categories (1930). He once wrote, "[if] you ask a manager what he does, he will most likely tell you that he plans, organizes, coordinates and controls. Then watch what he does. Don't be surprised if you can't relate what you see to those four words" (Mintzberg, 1975, p. 49). Later reviewers saw merit in Mintzberg's efforts but disagreed with his near dismissal of the importance of the classical concepts of planning, organizing, coordinating, and controling (Hales, 1986; Carroll & Gillen, 1987).

Hales

British management scholar Colin Hales (1986), in perhaps the most ambitious literature review to date, reviewed nearly thirty years of studies on what managers actually do. He found that there might be hidden underlying effectiveness in the seemingly frantic and disjointed behavior of managers. According to Hales:

> A picture of managerial work as technical, tactical, reactive and frenetic recurs across studies of time budgeting. Carlson . . . , Copeman . . . , Horne and Lupton . . . and Mintzberg . . . all indicate that even senior managers spend little time on planning or abstract formulation, are subject to constant interruptions, hold short face-to-face meetings which flit from topic to topic and respond to the initiatives of others far more than they indicate themselves. The conclusion drawn by these researchers is that the notion of the manager as a strategist, planner and thinker is a myth . . . and that even senior managers allow themselves to be diverted from their 'real work' by constant interruptions and capricious interpersonal contact.
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> . . . . . .
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> It was left to Kotter . . . , however, to develop these ideas, arguing that, in the context of 'agendas' and 'networks,' a reactive, informal and piecemeal distribution of time and effort is both efficient and

> effective. Agendas require large quantities of information to be gathered quickly, whilst the development and activation of networks requires interaction with large numbers of people, of ten informally. Consequently, the absence of planning is more apparent than real: managers plan implicitly, 'on their feet,' and reactive behavior is, in fact, an opportunistic way of achieving much in a short time. Similarly, disjointed interactions are not a sign of impulsiveness but of sweeping a range of problems rapidly (Hales, 1986, p. 96-97).

Luthans, Hodgetts and Rosenkrantz

Finally, a recent book by Luthans, Hodgetts and Rosenkrantz (1988) report the results of an extensive observational study on 44 managers from many different industries. They found that only 32% of managers' time is spent on the traditional management functions of planning, decision making, and controlling but that 68% of their time is spent on tasks such as routine communication, developing employees, and "networking" which includes socializing, politicking, and interacting with outsiders.

In summary the nearly thirty years of studies on what managers actually do portray managers as frenetic communicators who devour and disseminate information at a dizzying rate. What the studies do not explain is how

managers are able to cope and even thrive under such conditions. How can they possibly handle as much communication as they do, mentally organize it, and then use it to make thousands of often near instantaneous decisions? One answer might be that they use metaphors.

III. Metaphors in Organizational Theory

The Nature of Metaphors

The overall purpose of this section is to examine the use of metaphors in organizational theory. But first we examine the basic nature of metaphors.

Chiam Perelman and L. Obrechts - Tyteca (1968) in their treatise on argumentation describe the metaphor in this way.

> "A metaphor is a trope, that is, 'the artistic alteration of a word or phrase from its proper meaning to another.' It would even be the trope par excellence. By the use of metaphor, according to Dumarsais, 'we convert a noun's proper meaning to another meaning, which it can only bear by virtue of a comparison that resides in the mind.'
>
> With good reason, Richards rejects the idea of comparison as misleading and inadequate. With vigor and insight he insight he insists on the immense variety of the relations between concepts that a metaphor expresses in a single word. To him a metaphor is much more a matter of interaction than of substitution, a technique

> of research as much as one of embellishment (pp. 398-399).

Thus metaphors have both the power of explanation plus the power of heuristic invention. Perhaps their most important attribute is that they are parsimonious -- they can absorb a great deal of complexity for the theorist.

Yet, metaphors are more important than just rhetorical devices which are used once in an argument and then forgotten. They deeply influence our thinking. Morgan (1986) sees metaphors as an important, yet often ignored tools in many scholarly fields of knowledge including organizational theory.

> [O]ur theories and explanations of organizational life are based on metaphors that lead us to see and understand organizations in distinctive yet partial ways. Metaphor is often just regarded as a device for embellishing discourse, but its significance is much greater than this. For the use of metaphor implies a way of thinking and a way of seeing that pervade how we understand our world generally. For example, research in a wide variety of fields has demonstrated that metaphor exerts a formative influence on science, on our language and how we think, as well as how we express ourselves on a day-to-day basis.

Metaphors Used by Serious Organizational Theorists

If describing one organization is an intellectual

challenge, then describing many organizations as a class is an even more difficult task. The traditional answer in organizational theory has been to use metaphors as a theoretical tool in understanding organizations. This is partly because of the complexity of organizations but also because of the wide variety of ways in which organizations are studied. Charles Perrow (1983) almost apologetically wrote, "[a]s you know, organizations are extremely complicated. To have as much knowledge as we do have in a fledgling discipline that has had to borrow from the diverse tools and concepts of psychology, sociology, economics, engineering, biology, history, and even anthropology is not really so bad (p. 97).

Although metaphors have long been used to explain organizations, the implications of using metaphors have not explicitly addressed until recently. A recent Canadian research project conducted by Gareth Morgan (1986) has come to grips with the use of metaphors in organizational theory. Morgan suggests that theorists have relied on eight basic metaphors to explain organizations.

Firstly, Morgan (1986, pp. 19-38) identifies the metaphor of organizations as machines. He finds that the theories underlying classical management, bureaucratic design, and scientific management all rely on the machine metaphor.

Secondly, he sees the metaphor of organizations as organisms as undergirding general systems theory and similar

approaches (Morgan, 1986, pp. 39-74). Included in this category are open systems theory, contingency theory, organizational health, population-ecology views, and theories on the creation of shared futures.

Thirdly, he finds a category of metaphors which treat organizations as brains (Morgan, 1986, pp. 77-110). This group includes information processing theories, cybernetics, learning theories, and holographic design.

Fourthly, Morgan (1986) sees organizations as culture as a metaphor (pp. 111-133). This of course concerns the concept of organizational cultures as well as theories concerning the creation of shared realities.

Fifthly, he sees group centering around the metaphor of organizations as political systems (Morgan, 1986, 141-198). This group includes power, conflict, and pluralism theories.

Sixthly, Morgan (1986) sees a metaphor of organizations as psychic prisons (pp. 199-227). This includes the theories developed by the long tradition of the psychiatric study of organizations which is more popular in the United Kingdom than in the United States.

Seventhly, he sees a change metaphor in organizations as flux and transformation (Morgan, 1986, pp. 233-272). This category is not as crisp as the other categories and might be reasonably subsumed in the organizations as organisms metaphor. It concerns organizational evolution, narcissism, and dialectical change.

Finally, Morgan (1986) sees a metaphor group which he

describes as the ugly face -- organizations as instruments of domination (pp. 275-315). In this group he includes domination, class struggle, and exploitation theories.

One can quibble about the cataloging scheme or which theory belongs with which metaphor group, but Morgan's point is a powerful one. In order to understand what could otherwise not be understood, we need metaphors in organizational theory not only to explain organizations but also to prescribe macro solutions using organizational design and strategy. Morgan (1986) suggests that by moving our minds from metaphor to metaphor we can see situations with fresh perspectives and that we imprison ourselves by using only one metaphor group (p. 336).

It is interesting to note that there have even been metaphors of metaphor groups. One of the most popular articles used to introduce students to organizational theory is Charles Perrow's "The Short and Glorious History of Organizational Theory" (1983). With tongue firmly in cheek, he describes a protracted, back and forth military struggle between two forces in the development of organizational theory. He introduces his article with almost biblical grandeur:

> From the beginning, the forces of light and the forces of darkness have polarized the field of organizational analysis, and the struggle has been protracted and inconclusive. The forces of darkness have been represented by the mechanical school of organizational

> theory -- those who treat the organization as a machine . . . . The forces of light, which my [sic] mid-twentieth century came to be characterized as the human relations school, emphasizes people rather than machines, accommodations rather than machine-like precision, and draws its inspiration from biological systems rather than engineering systems (p. 90).

Metaphors are an important tool of the organizational scholar. Arguably, without the simplifying power of metaphors, organizational theory would grow obese until felled by its own weight. If metaphors are so important to organizational theory, are they equally important to working managers?

IV. Are Metaphors Important to Managers?

Up to this point, we have reviewed the studies of how managers work which revealed that managers work at a frenetic pace, move rapidly from one topic to another, cope with tremendous amounts of information, and make decisions in uncertain and ambiguous conditions. However, the studies are not very clear about how managers manage to do what they do. The mental processes of managers are treated like great mysteries -- mysteries both to researchers and even managers themselves.

We have also seen how metaphors have been extremely useful in the development of management theory. The

theorists use metaphors to absorb some of the complexity of organizations so that the human mind is capable of understanding. The tradition is long and venerable and shows no signs of exhaustion.

Two questions emerge. Firstly, do managers use metaphors as a method of coping, processing, and then using information in their decisions. Secondly, should managers be taught to use metaphors and even multiple metaphors in order to temper their decisions with the alternative viewpoints which different metaphors create?

Do Managers Use Metaphors?

There is nothing profound in saying that organizations are complex -- it's obvious even to the layman. The work of James March and Nobel Prize winner Herbert Simon (1958) stress how difficult it is to make decisions in organizations because of the complexity. They find that,

> [a]n individual can attend to only a limited number of things at a time. The basic reason why the actor's definition of the situation differs greatly from the objective situation is that the latter is far too complex to be handled in all of its detail. Rational behavior involves substituting for the complex reality a model of reality that is sufficiently simple to be-handled [sic.] by problem solving processes (p. 151).

They go on to discuss the implications of this complexity on organizational structure but for our purposes, it is clear

that their observations are consistent with the previously discussed studies which observe the behavior of managers within complex organizations. Managers have difficulty coping with all of the complexity they face. Yet somehow managers do cope. How they do it remains a mystery.

Mintzberg (1973) describes this mystery, largely ignored for over ten years, and its importance for both developing organizational theory and management education.

> The current reality is that all of these programs are locked in the manager's brain, not yet described by the management researcher. There can be no science of managing until these programs are demarcated, their contents specified, the set of them linked to simulation of management work, and particular ones subjected to systematic analysis and improvement (p. 173).

One possible way that managers may be coping with the complexity is through the use of metaphors. If metaphors are useful to organizational theorists, perhaps they are important to working managers as well.

It is obvious from anecdotal data that managers indeed do use metaphors but so does everybody. The question is are metaphors particularly useful for managers in gathering, processing, and using information in their decisions? It is high time that researchers take a hard look at how managers actually cope. An analysis of the metaphors used by managers would be an excellent first step.

Should Managers Be Taught to Use Metaphors?

This second question obviously depends somewhat on the answer to the first question. If researchers find that metaphors are an important way that working managers cope with the organizational complexity, then management education needs to marshall itself to train aspiring managers and seasoning managers how to use metaphors effectively and efficiently.

However, even if metaphors are not the preferred way that actual working managers cope with organizational complexity, there still may be usefulness in training managers and aspiring managers about metaphors. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, since so much organizational theory is based on metaphors, managers must know the strengths and limitations of these metaphors in order to understand organizational theory. Obviously, the higher the manager goes in the hierarchy the more important organizational theory becomes. Secondly, training managers to look at the same problem through different metaphors will give them new insight and expand their problem solving options.

Gareth Morgan (1986) argues that managers should be trained to use metaphors because they can create new insights in a very short period of time.

> Many practical people believe that theory gets in the way of practice and that, by and large, theorizing is a waste of time. But there is a great fallacy in this way

> of thinking. For in recognizing how taken-for-granted images or metaphors shape understanding and action, we are recognizing the role of theory. Our images or metaphors <u>are</u> theories or conceptual frameworks. Practice is never theory-free, for it is always guided by an image of what one is trying to do. The real issue is whether or not we are aware of the theory guiding our action.
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> But this does not mean that the process must take a long time. For as one develops the art of reading situations, critical analysis and evaluation become a way of thinking. One quickly learns to recognize the important cues and to uncover crucial insights. In developing this style of organizational analysis we have a means of linking theory to practice to deal with the complex and paradoxical nature of organizational life in a very realistic way (pp. 336-337).

V. Conclusions

Nearly 30 years of studies on what managers actually do have established conclusively that managers work at a frenetic pace, rapidly move from one concern to another and cope with tremendous amounts of information picked up largely through face to face or telephonic oral communication. Managers somehow process this information in their minds and

then make decisions. Despite the overwhelming quantity of "soft" information gathered, managers still must make decisions under conditions of ambiguity and uncertainty. Exactly how they cope or even thrive under such conditions is still a mystery.

It is also clear that metaphors have played an important role in the development of organizational theory. Metaphors help theorists absorb complexity so that organizations can be understood within the capabilities of the human mind.

It is suggested that managers might use metaphors as a way of coping with information, processing information and making decisions under conditions of uncertainty and ambiguity. It would be a very valuable contribution to management practice, management education and organizational theory if researchers could solve the mystery of how the minds of managers really work.

Even beyond a research agenda, it would be valuable to train aspiring or working managers in the use of metaphors. Such training would not only help managers view problems from different perspectives but would also help them understand the undergirding structure of organizational theory.

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